

Health Screening Recommendations for Children & Adolescents

Refugee Mental Health Assessment

Many refugees experienced very stressful situations prior to and/or during their relocation to the U.S. These may include traumatic experiences that result in continued distress, and in some cases may result in somatic complaints, depression, anxiety, or post traumatic stress disorder (P.T.S.D.) Questions on sensitive topics such as torture, rape, or violence should be reserved for trained mental health experts in the context of a trusting relationship, but health care providers may help refugees access these experts by 1) assessing the refugee's general orientation to place, date, and time, and 2) asking questions such as the ones below that might help indicate a need for referral to mental health services for evaluation.

According to Charles Kemp,

"Determining whether a problem exists is, of course, the first step. Assessment is confounded by language and cultural differences, time available for assessment, financial resources, and the shame many refugees feel about having experienced torture or related trauma. Probably the most common expression of psychological distress is vague somatic complaints (e.g., complaints of headache, abdominal pain, joint pain, muscular pain), often occurring at the same time, not attributable to organic causes, and not responsive to symptomatic or other treatment. Answers to direct questions about traumatic event(s) may be positively or negatively influenced by: trust or mistrust of the health care provider; trust or mistrust of the translator; sameness or difference in gender of the patient and the translator and/or health care provider; perception by the patient that something can or cannot be done about the problem; and other cultural, language and interpersonal factors.

Our experience has been that many refugees will readily discuss some traumatic experiences related to war such as fighting, bombing, and people killed; but are reluctant to discuss rape and torture unless there is (a) a trusting relationship, and (b) great personal distress. In general, the whole story comes out slowly and in stages."

Reference: http://www.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/refugee_mental_health.htm

Examples of Questions for Children

Ask parents:

- How is your child doing with the changes in his/her life?
- Do you have any concerns about how he/she is adjusting to life here?

Ask the child directly, with the parent's permission:

- What do you like about living here (i.e., in the U.S., Vermont)? What do you not like?
- What do you remember about your life in (country of origin)?
- Have you made friends here? What do you like to do with your friends?
- Who do you talk to if you have a problem with your friends, or at school?
- Do you ever feel mad about what has happened in your life? What do you do when you feel mad?
- Do you ever feel like hurting yourself or hurting someone else?
- Do you ever feel really sad? What makes you sad?
- Do you worry a lot about your life/ school/ your family?

Examples of Questions for Adolescents and adults

- Has your appetite recently changed?
- Have you recently changed the way you sleep (too much/too little/unusual hours)?
- Do you have a lot more/a lot less energy than before?
- Do you find yourself worrying a lot about your family, your job, school, or other parts of your life?
- Do you think about the past so much that you find it difficult to focus on your life right now?
- (For people with somatic complaints) When is your pain at its worst? What do you think causes your pain?
- Do you often feel angry? Do you ever feel like you've lost control of your anger?
- Do you feel like you have any time to relax? What kinds of things do you do to relax?

- Do you ever feel like your thoughts don't make sense? Does your family ever tell you that you're not making sense?
- Do you ever use alcohol or (street) drugs? How often do you use alcohol or (street) drugs? Does anyone in your family worry about how much you drink?
- Have you ever taken medication for your nerves? For depression or anxiety? To help you think more clearly?
- Who do you talk to when you're having a problem? Do you feel like that person understands? Would you be interested in talking with someone else who might be more understanding about your problem (i.e. a mental health professional)?

If you have concerns about a person's response, contact one of the agencies below for referral assistance.

·Clara Martin Center, Bradford.....	222-4477	·Lamoille Co. Mental Health.....	888-5026
·Clara Martin Ctr., Randolph.....	728-4466	·NEK Mental Health, Newport.....	334-6744
·Counseling Service of Addison Co.....	388-6751	·NEK Mental Health, St. Johnsbury.....	748-3181
·HCRS of Southeastern VT, B. Falls.....	463-3947	·Northeastern Family Institute.....	658-0040
·HCRS of Southeastern VT, Brattleboro..	254-6028	·Northwest Counseling&Support Svcs..	524-6554
·HCRS of Southeastern VT, Springfield...	885-5781	·Rutland Mental Health Services.....	775-2381
·HCRS of Southeastern VT, WRJ.....	295-3031	·United Counseling Services.....	442-5491
·Howard Ctr for Human Services.....	658-0400	·Washington Co. Mental Health.....	479-4083

For further information and resources on refugee mental health, see the following websites:

http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/clin_topics/mental_health.html
http://www.baylor.edu/~Charles_Kemp/refugee_mental_health.htm